

## **Satire in Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel***

**Guruprasad S Y,  
Research Scholar (PhD in English),  
Department of English, University of Mysore, Mysore  
Karnataka  
India**

### ***Abstract***

The present paper gives a glimpse on satire in Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*. *The Great Indian Novel* is Tharoor's first and well-known novel. This research article depicts the satiric narrative in *The Great Indian Novel*. As a postmodern writer, Shashi Tharoor uses different narrative strategy such as satire, pun, parody, humour and comedy. In the first part of my research paper I have explained Shashi Tharoor's life and his literary background. In the second part of my paper I wrote a brief introduction to Indian Writing in English and the importance of satirical narrative in the eighteenth century English Literature. In the final part of my paper I have analyzed satire in Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*.

**Key Words:** Satire, Shashi Tharoor, postmodern, Indian Literature

## Introduction:

Shashi Tharoor is one of the prominent writers in the field of Indian Writing in English. He is also called as a postmodern writer who is known for his experimental writing both in fiction and non-fiction works. Basically an international civil servant and a star journalist, Tharoor is known as a political thinker and an intellectual both nationally and internationally. He has been in the U.N for more than twenty five years. He is widely known for his exemplary work as a International Civil Servant and also for his literary career. Most significantly, his writings are about Indian, but of universal significance.

Shashi Tharoor's first novel, *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), he has adopted different narrative like satire, pun, parody, irony humour and comedy. Among these techniques, satire and parody are the dominant modes. Shashi Tharoor has become a beacon of satirical mode in Indian Writing in English by adopting satire, an eighteenth century literary mode, to narrate a twentieth century reality. Indian Writing in English had not given much serious attention to satire, like in English literature. Only a few writers have tried to employ satire in their writings. R.K.Narayan has used gentle of irony and paradox in his novels. His comic vision is full of irony. His irony includes social and political context in his character with different experiences. The irony lies in clash between tradition and modernity. The modernity in his novels disturbs the peaceful life of tradition in Narayan's works. Narayan is the pioneer of ironic realism in fiction of Indian Writing in English. His knowledge of irony in human life makes him the master of comedy. A.K. Ramanujan also employed satire in his poems but not as a serious mode. Shashi Tharoor made use of satire as a dominant mode in his unique way of narration. Through his writings he tries to pose more questions than give answers, what is usually done by a satirist.

Shashi Tharoor was born in London in May 1956. His father was a newspaper executive and his mother was a house wife. Tharoor hails from Palakkad, a town in Kerala. Tharoor finished his schooling and under-graduation in Indian cities such as Bombay, Calcutta and Delhi. In the mid 1970, he went to the United States and acquired two Master's degrees and a Ph.D in Diplomacy from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, all by the age of twenty two. He joined the United Nations in May 1978 in the office of the U.N High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Geneva. He is a known columnist. He has been writing a fortnightly column for *The Hindu*

Newspaper since 2001 and a weekly column “Shashi on Sunday”, in the *Times of India* starting January 2007. Previously he was a columnist for the *Gentleman Magazine* and the *Indian Express*. Tharoor’s working experience gave him deep understanding of Indian history to the present day politics and bureaucracy. He has written extensively both fiction of the nonfiction. *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), *Show Business* (1992), and *Riot* (2001) are his three novels and he wrote a short story *The Five Dollar Smile and Other Stories* (1990). There are six non-fiction works-*Reasons of State* (1982), *Indian: From Midnight to the Millennium* (1997), *Kerala God’s Own Country* (2002), *Nehru: The Invention of India* (2003), *Bookless in Bhagdad* (2005), *The Elephant, the Tiger and the Cell Phone, India – The Emerging 21<sup>st</sup> Century Power* (2007).

### **A Brief Introduction on Indian Writing in English:**

Indian Writing in English has witnessed over the years many changes both stylistically and thematically. 1930 is a landmark in Indian Writing in English especially in fiction writing. The Stalwarts: Mulk Raj Anand, R.K.Narayan and Raja Rao, emerged to world fame and had different concepts in their writings. After Independence, Indian Writing in English has undergone major changes. It also changed the global perception. There has been many writers who took writing as their main weapon to express their hidden voices. Some writers like Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Sarojini Naidu, Kamala Das, Mamoni Raisom Goswami and Mahashwetha Devi, took feminism as their main concern of narration. Other writers like Nayantara Sahgal, Salman Rushdie, and Shashi Tharoor reflected national politics in their narratives.

The trauma of emergency and partition was also highlighted in Indian Writing in English. In *A Time To be Happy* (1958) Nayantra Sahgal takes the emergency trauma as their main theme; while Indian Independence is the main concern in Salman Rushdie’s Books Prize winning novel *Midnight’s Children* (1981), which acclaimed as a milestone in Indian Writing in English. Arundati Roy got a Booker Prize for her novel *A God of Small Things* (1997), she calls herself a “home grown” writers. Her award-winning novel immensely projects the physical landscape of Kerala. Kiran Desai, a non-resident Indian got the Booker Prize for her *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006). It is about social and political unrest in India. Recently, Indian Writing in English reached great height when Arvind Adiga got the Booker Prize for his novel *The White Tiger* (2008). Adiga has been outside India for many years, his writing deals with India and Indians. The main strength of *The White Tiger* is the contrary view that the author takes on the so-called India shining,

propaganda. Shashi Tharoor made an entry into the field of Indian Writing in English in 1989 through his historical novel, *The Great Indian Novel* (1989).

There is metamorphosis in the entity called Indian Writing in English. Earlier it was known as Anglo-Indian Literature, Indo-Anglian Literature, Indo-English Literature, the Indian contribution to English Literature etc. Indian Writing in English started through writing letters and petitions to the colonial masters and later it has evolved as creative writing. *Rajmohan's Wife* by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya is the first English novel in India. It is also a major landmark in fiction writing. 1930 saw the Renaissance period in Indian Writing in English with the contribution of the 'trio'. They dwelt with Indian Cultural and Social aspects as Mulkraj Anand dealt with the social problems through his Gandhian and Marxian points of view. R.K. Narayan was well-known as a realistic writer who never resorted to philosophic writing. He confined his themes to ordinary subjects but has used many literary techniques such as humour, gentle irony and so on. Raja Rao dealt with political and spiritual aspects. After the 'trio' Indian Writing in English has not seen anything momentous for sometime although we had many important writers like Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sahgal etc wrote during this period. 1980 was the postmodern era. It was a landmark period in Indian Writing in English, when new ideas started infiltrating into creative writing. Especially in 1980, Salman Rushdie's Booker Prize winning novel, *Midnight's Children*, is an important work for some experimental writing and use of Countrified English, magic realism, word play, mythology, interconnected stories, elaborate allegories, and layers of satire, irony pun etc. Tharoor is well established scholarly writer, whose writings are about Indian social and political aspects. Tharoor has proved his ability as a successful writer in fiction and non-fiction through his different ways of narration, using satire as dominant mode. Therefore this study has attempted to show how Tharoor has made use of satire as the main mode of narration in his novels, especially in his first historical novel, *The Great Indian Novel*.

### **Satire and Tharoor:**

Shashi Tharoor as a well known postmodernist, uses the postmodern techniques in his novels very effectively. Satire mode becomes predominant in Tharoor's writing. Satire writing is known for fragmented narration and for fragmented ideas. These are very much a part of postmodernism also. It is relevant to have some understanding of postmodernism. It refers to certain to radically experimental works of literature and art produced after World War II. Postmodernists have taken some of the meaning and methods from

modernists like T.S. Eliot. He perceived the world as fragmented as represented that fragmentation through poetic language. Tharoor's three novels have fragmentation of narration and ideas.

It is a precondition to define 'satire' which is a protean term and also it is worth having a glimpse on the development of 'satire' in different parts of the world in different arts. 'Satire' often strictly defined as a literary genre or form; although, in practice it also found in the graphic and performing arts. In 'satire', human or individual voices, follies, abuses or short comings are held up to censure by means of ridicule, derision, burlesque, irony or other methods, ideally with the intent to bring about improvement. Although, 'satire' is usually meant to be funny, the purpose of satire is not primarily humour in itself so much as an attack on something of which the author strongly disapproves using the weapon of wit.

The word 'Satire' comes from Latin 'Satura lanx' which means 'medley, dish of colourful fruits'- it was held by Quintilian to be a "Wholly Roman Phenomenon" (Saturatola Nostra est). This derivation properly has nothing to do with the Greek mythological a figure 'satyr'. To Quintilian, the 'satire' was a strict literary form, but the term soon escaped from its original narrow definition. Robert Elliott writes:

As soon as a noun enters the domain of metaphor, as one modern scholar has pointed out, it clamours of extension; and satura (which had no verbal, adverbial, or adjectival forms) was immediately broadened by appropriation from the Greek Work for "Satyr" (Satyrs) and its derivatives. The old result is that the English "satire" comes from the Latin Satura; but "Satirize", "Satiric", etc are a Greek origin. By about the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD the writer of satires come to be known as satyricus; St. Jerone for example, was called by one of his enemies 'a satirist in prose' (Satyricus scriptor in prosa') ("The Nature of Satire", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*: 2004).

'Satire' (in the modern sense of the word) is found in many artistic forms of expression, including literature, plays commentary, and media such as song lyrics. The term is also today applied to many works other than those which would have been considered satire by Quintilian – including, for instance ancient Greek authors predating the first Roman Satires.

‘Satire’ is a kind of literary mode like tragedy and comedy but it has never received much attention like tragedy, comedy and romance. Only in eighteenth century English literature gave importance to satire and it became a popular literary mode. During this period there were many satirists who used satiric mode for effective way of criticism. Some of them were very critical and some others were modest in their application of satire. Johanthan Swift, Alexander Pope and some others, to some extent they used the satirical mode for their personal animosity. In ‘Satire’ there are two possibilities- one is ‘positive’ and another one is ‘negative’ satire. In this paper, Shashi Tharoor’s satire as a positive one will be examined. Tharoor’s use of satire is completely different. He himself considers satire an important exhilarating way of dealing with human experience of the past and the present. ‘Satire’ is perhaps the most relevant literary mode in the present context of Indian Writing in English, because it is on the glory and folly of India and the Indian society.

#### **Satire in *The Great Indian Novel*:**

In *The Great Indian Novel*, parody is the main mode of narration. Tharoor has taken as existing work *Mahabharata*, which was created with a serious purpose, and he has contextualized it with the present political condition. Using of satire in *The Great Indian Novel* by Tharoor is one of the most delightful, natural and the most effective forms. Shashi Tharoor has used parody in this novel. Tharoor’s using of parody is not just imitation; it wounds the original in *The Great Indian Novel* he points out faults, reveals hidden affections, emphasizes weakness and diminishes strength, and through these elements he has made it a satiric parody.

*The Great Indian Novel* is Shashi Tharoor’s most ambitious classical novel. For this novel Tharoor has gained fame and a wider reader audience both in Indian and outside Indian. In 1990, it has won the Federation of Indian publishers and it won *Hindustan Times the Literary Award* for the best book of the year. It also won *Commonwealth Prize* in 1991, for the best book of the year in Eurasian region.

*The Great Indian Novel* is a political satire. Tharoor incorporates remote history with the recent history. For Tharoor *Mahabharata* is the main source of inspiration to write this novel. The *Mahabharata* is not a novel but an epic poem. However Tharoor has incorporated, both verse and prose forms for effective satiric narration. He made use of satirical neighbours such as parody, irony, allegory, lampoon, humour and derision etc.



*The Great Indian Novel* is a fictional work of Tharoor that takes the story of the *Mahabharata*, the epic of Hindu Mythology, and recasts and resets it in the context of the Indian Independence Movement. It also figures out the first three decades of Post-Independence and shows. The Indian history is transformed into characters from mythology, and the mythical story of India is retold as a history of Indian Independence and subsequent history through the 1980s. The *Mahabharata* is an epic tale describing the dynastic struggle over the throne of the kingdom of Hastinapur between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, two branches of the heirs of the king Shantanu. In *The Great Indian Novel* Tharoor recasts the story of the nascent Indian democracy as a struggle between groups and individuals closely related to personal and political histories. Through his cantankerous narrator, Tharoor takes an irreverent tone towards figures such as Mohandas Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi who are ordinarily treated with reverence by Indian.

Tharoor as a satirist sees the individual or society completely different as a non-satirist. Tharoor has fictionalized all the national heroes names and also names of the place. V.V. Giri, writer, Orator, politician, labour activist, freedom fighter, and governor for several states was President of India in 1977. In *The Great Indian Novel* whose fictional name is Ved Vyas, the narration, Eighty Eight year old. V.V dictates his narration to Ganapathi, a young South Indian scribe sent by Ved Vyas's friend Brahma to transcribe the tale. Tharoor has described him as an original Ganesh the Elephant-headed Hindu God who wrote down Vyasa's account of the *Mahabharata*.

Tharoor has fictionalized two groups of Kaurava and Pandava parties. The Congress party as a Kaurava party, the villains led by Duryodhani, who usurp the Pandavas from the rule of Hastinapura- Indira Gandhi, daughter of Nehru, and the third Prime Minister. In Tharoor's fictionalization who appears as Priya Duryodhani, the autocratic villain, daughter of Dhritarastra and the head of the Kaurava party. Duryodhani appears in a changed sex and represent hundred Kauravas. Priya Duryodhani popularly is known as only man in the entire parliament. Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the father of Pakistan, a law graduate and more an anglophile than Nehru who began his career as a colleague of Nehru and Gandhi in the Indian National Congress, fictionalized as Mohammad Ali Karna, son of Kunti and Hyperion Helios, the leader of the Muslims.

Tharoor is a true satirist. He keeps his satirical aspects as a constant attacking instrument. Tharoor has used all forms of satires like allegory, irony, pun, parody etc.

Tharoor has adopted Menippean satire in *The Great Indian Novel*. A Menippean Satire is essentially a prose narrative which usually contains some verse. But Tharoor has used Menippean satire not to attack folly but to bring effective narration and to justify to the main source of inspiration. The word 'Menippean Satire' is derived from Greek Satirist 'Menippus' (Ca. 340- Ca- 270 B.C) Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* starts with the Menippean Satire verse, which has brought the fairness to the original work *Mahabharata*:

What follows is the tale of Vyasa,  
Great Vyasa, deserver of respect;  
A tale told and retold,  
The people who never cease telling;  
A source of wisdom,  
In the sky, the earth, and the lower worlds,  
A tale twice – born know;  
A tale for the learned,  
Skillful in style varied in metres,  
Devoted to dialogue human and divine

P Lal

-The *Mahabharata* of Vyasa

This verse serves as an invocation to Tharoor's writing. Tharoor himself is no scholar of Sanskrit. He solely depends on P. Lal's and Raja Gopalachari's translation. This verse itself encapsulates the entire story of the *Mahabharata*.

Shashi Tharoor has satirized all national heroes. There is a reason behind this, the object of satire should be wire persons. W.H. Auden in his essay "Satire: The Object of Satire" states each can be the object of satire:

The comic but of satire is a person who, though in possession of moral faculties, transgresses the moral law beyond the normal call of temptation. Thus the lunatic cannot be an object for satire because he is responsible for his actions, nor can be devilish be an object because, while responsible, he lacks the normal faculty of conscience. (Paulson, 202)



Tharoor's comic but is Dhritarastra who is in possession of moral faculties. He becomes a satirical object. Dhritarastra is a privileged son; Tharoor's description of Dhritarastra is satirical:

Dhritarastra was a fine-looking young fellow, slim of a aquiline nose and aristocratic bearing. His blindness was, of course, a severe handicap, but he learned early to act as if it did not matter. As a child he found education in India a harrowing experience, which was no doubt, even he was in due course sent to Eton [...]. He quickly acquired two dozen suits, a different pair of shoes... abstracted manner of the over educated with these assets he was admitted to King's college, Cambridge; he devoted himself to developing another kind of vision and became, successively a formidable debater, a Bachelor of Arts and Fabian Socialist. (Tharoor, 41)

The Satirist is the guardian of ideals, so Shashi Tharoor is angry to the imperialist's exploitation:

[...] Not of Indian weavers whose thumbs the British had cut off in order to protect the machine of Lancashire; not of the Indian peasants whose lands has been seized over to Zamindars who would guarantee the colonists the social place. They needed to run the country, and not of the destination and hunger to which there policies reduced Indians. Indulge an old man's sage, Ganapathi and write this down: the British killed the Indian artisan, they created the Indian landless labourers, they exported our full employment and they invented our poverty. (Tharoor, 95)

Tharoor has been berated on colonial masters and their attitude to Indian economy now they are only calling India is an underdeveloped country.

In *The Great Indian Novel*, the sixth book "Forbidden Fruit" is the counterpart to the *Mahabharata*'s "Book of Bhishma". This part is the most defining event in Indian Freedom Movement. Dhritarastra is the head of Kaurava party and Pandu is an equal to deserver for the same position. But he is deprived of from any positions so he left the Kaurava party. Gangaji kicks off the Great Mango March (allusion to Salt March).

In Tharoor's adopted *Mahabharata* Gangali dies in the middle and, before that there have been many conflicts within the national political parties. Mohammed Ali Karna, Muslim leader wanted a separate state called Karnistan. As partition is the dominant subject in Indian Writing in English, Shashi Tharoor has used his best to tell the partition

trauma. Tharoor has employed satire to satirize colonial blunder, he gives a clear picture of partition of land:

‘Congratulations, Mr. Nichols!’.... you have just succeeded in putting your international border through the middle of the market, giving the rice fields to Karnistan and the warehouse to India, the largest pig-farm in the Zilla to the Islamic state and the Madrassah of the Holy Prophet to the country the Muslims are leaving. Oh, and If I understand that squiggle there correctly he added, taking a pointer from the open-mouthed expert, the school master will require a passport to go to the too between classes. Well done, Mr. Nichols I hope the rest of your work proves as-easy (Tharoor, 225).

The above paragraph is more satirical on imperialists than other reason of partition. The fourteenth book of *The Great Indian Novel* is “The Rigged Veda”. It is counterpart to the *Mahabharata*’s “Book of the House Sacrifice”. Tharoor’s satire is contempt of criticism. In Roland Paulson’s book *Satire: Modern Essay’s in Criticism*, David Worcester gives the illustrated detail that will be the content of satire in his essay “From the Art of Satire”. He writes:

The content of satire is criticism, and criticism may be uttered as direct rebuke or as impersonal logic. Innumerable intermediate stages, by combining emotion and intellect in different proportions, lead from one pole to blind, human feeling to the opposite pole in divine, or in human detachment [...]. (117)

Tharoor’s matter directly related to urban elite institutions and imperialists partiality. He illustrates:

Institution of higher learning colleges of technology, school of management mushroomed in the dark humid forests of our ignorance. The British had neglected village education in this effort to module a limited class of petty clerks to turn the lower wheels of their bureaucracy, so we too neglected the villages in our efforts to widen that literate class for their new places [...] our medical schools produced the most gifted ached without aspirin. Our institutes of technology were generously subsidized by our tax revenues to churn out brilliant graduates for the research laboratories of American corporations, while our emaciated women carried pans of stores on their head to the building- sites of new institutes. When, belatedly, our universities became ‘rurally conscious’ and offered specializations implant

pathology and modern agriculture methods, their graduates were a bid a rapid fare well to the wantle land of Auadh and Annamalai and earn immense salaries for making Arab deserts bloom. (Tharoor, 294)

This paragraph has been quoted paradoxically one side of brighter India and another dark side. Ironically, these ideas are the dream of Dhritarastra also he always subscribed to western industrial development concept which was contradictory to the Gandhiji's (Gandhi's) ideas of small scale industry. Tharoor as a satirist is bitter in *The Great Indian Novel*.

### **Conclusion:**

In the analysis of *The Great Indian Novel*, Shashi Tharoor has been primarily textual and satirical. Satire is not an endangered literary mode, it arises now and then in James Sultherland's *English Satire*, he states how satire is eternal and only there are variations in usage. He explains:

Satire, then, is not an extinct dinosaur or pterodactyl, row of yellow bones in the literary Museum, but a living and lively form thus has still a vital part to play in twentieth century literature. If the satirist cannot save us he can at least encourage us not to give up without struggle; and he can, and does, let in a current of fresh air which fills our lungs and keeps our blood in circulation. (Sutherland, 22)

Satire has proved that it can be used for various effects of narration. Tharoor as a satirist is reckoned as a moralist who examines the right and wrong as they are revealed in each character's responses to a given situation in life.

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